

Should we display the dead?

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Abstract

The extensive analytical literature on human remains in museums has thus far been dominated by questions of repatriation and reburial. But how should those remains that are retained be treated? In this piece authors with different disciplinary perspectives explore the arguments for and against the display of human remains. We offer no definitive conclusion, but rather a respectful dissensus.

Key words: display, human remains, *Bodyworlds*, Lindow Man, Manchester

Introduction

In 2007, the *Bodyworlds* road show arrived in Manchester (United Kingdom) to be displayed in the Museum of Science and Industry. As it has done in 40 cities since 1995 (this was the fourth incarnation, and it has spawned imitators), it generated criticism in the press and consternation among museum professionals. Nevertheless, *Bodyworlds* has attracted over 25 million visits worldwide. Across town, at the Manchester Museum (a university collection of natural history, archaeology and anthropology) a very different exhibition opened: *Lindow Man: a Bog Body Mystery*. It presented the remains of an Iron Age individual uncovered on Lindow Moss, Cheshire, in 1984 (Kenyon and Neave 1987). Usually cared for by the British Museum, this was the third time Lindow Man had been exhibited at the Manchester Museum – the first, in 1987, attracted the largest number of visits to any exhibition there before or since.

Clearly both exhibitions are appealing. But the contrast between these different ways of displaying human remains could not have been more marked (Rees Leahy 2008; cf. Brooks and Rumsey 2007). This disparity was the topic of a public debate – held at the Museum of Science and Industry but organized by the Manchester Museum – with the blunt title, ‘Should We Display the Dead?’; the present paper, with its unusual structure, emerged from that debate. After a brief contextual introduction, three sections assess the arguments for different responses to the question – ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘sometimes’. In order to address a wide spectrum of positions, the first two are purposefully provocative, the latter covering the measured ground between them. We hope that this piece will thereby be useful as a map of this contested terrain. It proffers no definitive conclusion – in argument or indeed structure – but rather a respectful dissensus.

Much of the analytical literature concerning human remains to date has concentrated, understandably, on repatriation and/or reburial (e.g. Jenkins 2008; Smith 2004). Only more recently has more attention been afforded to the *use* of human remains: if they are to be retained in western museums, how and whether they should be displayed (Brooks and Rumsey 2007; Lohman and Goodnow 2007). To understand the sensitivity and vigour of the topic at hand, we need to grasp two decades of arguments about human remains in museums – and the debates in Manchester provide a useful handle on them in England generally. This apparent cacophony makes more sense if the arguments are framed within different disciplinary perspectives. For although attitudes to dead bodies vary according to many factors, their source is especially significant. Their age and location determines which professional group will take custody of the remains, and which communities may identify with them. During their afterlives they become associated with one or more of four contingent groupings: anthropology (whether cultural or physical, the latter sometimes as part of zoology); anatomy or pathology, usually within medical museums; archaeology, which in England is more distinct from anthropology than in other

Anglophone contexts; and Egyptology, which has historically been separate from other archaeology in museums. These groups and their collection overlap and intersect, but the character of the debates about retention and use are markedly different in each case.

Physical anthropology collections in England were largely gathered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from Britain's colonial possessions in Africa and Oceania. Museum ethnographers began to consider the ethical issues around their collections in earnest in the late twentieth century (Fforde 2004). Although the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States (USA) and high-profile returns in Australia did not directly impact upon museum policy in England, they did fuel growing debate. At the Manchester Museum, staff began to repatriate human remains of Maori origin in 1990 (Alberti 2009), prompting some concern among museum ethnographers elsewhere. A series of surveys and guidelines were published throughout the 1990s (e.g. Museum Ethnographers Group 1994), and by the early years of the new millennium the Manchester Museum was only one of a number of institutions returning items to museums and communities in Australia and New Zealand. The then Director Tristram Besterman sat on the Human Remains Working Group established by the governmental Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to assess the issue of repatriation, which reported in 2003 (Working Group on Human Remains 2003). Focused primarily on the arguments and procedures around retention and repatriation of non-British remains, the report and the guidelines issued in its wake had little to say on the issue of display (DCMS 2005). Few human remains originating in the last century from outside Europe continue to be displayed in England, although large holdings of physical anthropology remain in storage.

Concurrent with these developments, curators elsewhere in the sector were forced to re-assess their human holdings for very different reasons. Scandals prompted by the retention of body parts from patients (especially children) in hospitals prompted the Retained Organs Commission (2001–4), chaired by Margaret Brazier, Professor of Law at the University of Manchester. Its recommendations gave rise to the Human Tissue Act 2004. Principally aimed at licensing medical schools, the Act nevertheless applies to museum collections less than a century old, prompting thorough surveys of all medical collections, especially regarding the consent of the patient. Largely a licensing body, the Human Tissue Authority also issued brief guidelines for the display of human remains, which are mostly concerned with the issue of consent for remains less than 100 years old (Human Tissue Authority 2006). *Bodyworlds*, however controversial, is of course entirely compliant with the HTA.

Whereas human remains held in medical and anthropological collections (Fforde 2004) tended to be of relatively recent origin – most are from the last 150 years – the vast majority of remains held in English museums are far older, and are held in archaeology collections. Although largely ignored in the high profile debates just outlined, these huge holdings began to receive attention in the last decade on two fronts. On one hand, the Church of England and English Heritage have sought to regularize the treatment of excavated bodies from Christian burial grounds (Mays 2005). Elsewhere, Pagan and Druidic groups, who feel a close association with ancient human remains of British origin, have requested the reburial of some ancient remains, and more respectful displays of those on display. These issues were central to the conference held at the Manchester Museum in 2006 on 'Respect for Ancient British Human Remains' (Bienkowski 2006a). Again, however, the focus was on reburial rather than display.

Turning to the last of our four categories: *Bodyworlds* notwithstanding, the most popular displays of human remains in English museums are those of Ancient Egyptian origin. From unwrappings in scientific (or other) contexts to the Egypto-mania associated with Tutankhamun in the 1920s and 1970s (Colla 2008; McAlister 1996), museum professionals have been happy to display mummies, wrapped or unwrapped, and the public has been delighted to view them. As the Manchester Museum found recently when it temporarily shrouded some of its exhibits, some are especially keen for them to remain on display.¹ Thus far in the UK, there have been few claims for return or requests for specific modes of display from Egyptian sources, official or otherwise. The disparity between the treatment of mummies and other kinds of human remains in museum collections is thereby marked, and becoming more so.

It is clear that there are widely variant circumstances in which human remains can be displayed in museums: of acquisition, of geography, of age, of purpose, of cultural context. But the question remains: should they be displayed at all?

YES

As long as the human body is shrouded in mystery, we will remain unsure of what it means to be human, and what we can learn from the human body. Scientists who study skeletal remains view human bodies as vital sources of information: how we lived, worked and suffered in the past; how disease (and recovery) mark our bodies both in the past and today; what we can do, today, to give ourselves better health and improve our present lives. Diseases evolve as do all organisms, and witnessing the changes can guide scientists to deal with recurring threats.

The human body, including ancient remains, is important in the study of past health. We study medieval skeletons with evidence of Paget's Disease to better understand why women are almost equally affected now, whereas in the past it was generally a male disease (Ortner 2003). Paget's Disease remains of unknown etiology, but evidence suggests it is becoming more prevalent. Recently, the lead-coffin protected remains of a soldier who died of the 1918 Flu Pandemic have been exhumed and sampled (as have other victims of the 1918 Spanish Flu), with the family's consent, for information that may prove life-saving should the current avian flu evolve into a zoonosis affecting humans (BBC News 2008).

To explore the topic of 'display' of the dead, which differs from scientific and medicinal use of the dead, several themes will be briefly addressed: examples of how the dead have been displayed, both in modern times and the past; the potential gains from such display; the question of who 'owns' the dead and who can presume to 'speak' for the dead; and how the current western tendency to avoid dealing with death influences all of these aspects.

The display of a dead individual can, in modern times, create interest in science and in ways that ancient bodies inform on the past. When considering the *Bodyworlds* displays, it can be understood why some people will be uncomfortable viewing them; perhaps the plastinated bodies may seem lurid. These displayed figures recall the work of early anatomists such as John Hunter and his brother William. In the eighteenth century, the Hunters created wax-infused 'preparations' of organs, limbs, skin, and the circulatory and lymph node systems (Moore 2005). John Hunter was the first to discover and then map the lymph node system; he is arguably the father of modern surgery. Without formal training including the use of such 'preparations' to guide students, surgery was invariably fatal. The interdependence of internal systems was a mystery; a caesarean section was often a death sentence.

There are many ways to 'display' a body. Burial recreations of skeletonized individuals provide examples of how people behaved in vanished societies. Skeletons can be viewed as trophies – in a sense as 'scalps' – or they can be viewed as an uncritical, unvarnished truth of what lies beneath all of the things that seem so important in life – skin colour, fat, scars, beauty, ugliness, difference. The skeleton represents human life at its most universal, stripped of the apparent differences that can divide the living.

What can be gained from displaying the dead? Such displays graphically illustrate the rigors of medieval life, a time before antibiotics and social services. In the Jorvik Centre in York, which offers scenes of life in the city a thousand years ago, visitors can observe remnants of artefacts such as leather shoes, household goods and hand tools; recreated tools being used by manikins; and depictions of butchery, trade, and domestic activities including food preparation. Prevalent risks of medieval life are also clearly illustrated, with the last section offering actual examples of poorly healed fractures; invasive bone infections unrelieved by antibiotics; and what severe osteoporosis or devastating osteoarthritis really look like. People in war-struck and impoverished regions in the world suffer these same untreated injuries and diseases. There is an argument that children – and adults – should have the opportunity of becoming aware of the real lives of less fortunate individuals.

When small children and younger adults actually experience captivating displays, their interest is piqued, their intellect stirred, perhaps a life-long exploration begins. Remains should not be relegated solely to the scholar and *bona fide* post-graduate student: by the time a young person is in higher education, their interests are established, and academic choices have been made. Such displays therefore act as 'advertisement' for the next generation of eminent physicians and anti-cancer researchers. To segregate the interested and engaged public from the *bona fide* scholar is to promote the aura of 'elitism', which is quite at odds with the widening participation agenda of modern western museums and universities.

Who displays the dead, and should the dead be displayed? Human bodies and parts of

bodies have been publicly displayed for thousands of years in many different cultures. The body of Lenin is on display in Red Square, Moscow. The Pope is currently displaying the body of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (otherwise known as Padre Pio) in the Vatican for public veneration to mark the fortieth anniversary of his death (Owen 2008). Saints and various relics of saints have not only been displayed (and even sold), but have also had entire sections of churches constructed to accommodate them throughout the history of Christianity (Luce 1979; Hadley 2001).

The Taíno, the indigenous Caribbean population who met Columbus in the Caribbean, displayed *zemis* (Drew 2009; Olazagasti 1997; Rouse 1992). *Zemis* represented household gods, and could be made of shell, cloth, or bone. If constructed of bone, they were small, hand-polished segments of human bone, and pre-Contact they were openly displayed. Members of Taíno society were fully aware that these fragments of human bone were displayed, and perhaps anticipated having parts of themselves retained for demonstrations of respect during ancestor worship. In Copán, the First Ruler in an influential Maya lineage was buried in a small pyramidal structure left accessible at the top. Each subsequent ruler was buried in a nested pyramid structure above that, one over the other; but access to the bones of the First Ruler remained available for retrieval through an open shaft for special ceremonies requiring his presence (Marcello Caputo, personal communication 2003).

Who speaks for the dead? Many contemporary belief systems may revolve around non-disturbance of the dead, but what did the ancient dead themselves believe? It is inappropriate to deign to speak for them, and to assign religious beliefs to someone long dead whose way of life can only be surmised by studying their mortal remains and artefacts. Can we speak for people dead 10,000 years?

Who owns the dead? The immediate family does not – and a family cannot bury their loved ones in the back garden unless the garden is part of a large private estate. According to a recent study of the medieval plagues (Naphy and Spicer 2000), bodies were buried in mass graves and covered in lime, regardless of what the family desired. People attempted to hide plague deaths for the very reason that the state could and would seize the body. The state could burn the possessions of the rest of the family and clear out the house at will. In modern plagues this is no different, as demonstrated by the British government's heavily interventionist response to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001 and 2007. It is highly probable that a modern human-borne plague would be treated much the same, certainly as to containment and government-controlled disposal of the dead. In cases of murder, the body is seized and held as 'evidence'. Soldiers who are killed on the battlefield are buried in military contexts, even against the wishes of their own families (Brown 2007). Legal ownership of dead bodies continues to be a complex issue (Dickenson 2008; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002; Skene 2002).

In 2006 *Bodyworlds* was exhibited in Toronto, Canada, and became the subject of a few short articles and comments posted on LifeScience.com. Researcher Kathy Hirsh-Pasek expressed her belief that education should be based much more directly on the interests of the learners. According to Hirsh-Pasek, babies learn words for things that they find interesting. When Hirsh-Pasek visited *Bodyworlds* she is quoted as saying, 'It blew me away....All of a sudden, biology was so interesting'. Heather Whipps said of the same show, 'No matter how comprehensive today's anatomy textbooks can be, nothing beats the in-your-face visual of a REAL human body, inner workings and all, on display' (Britt 2006).

Modern western society is so removed from death and from the natural consequences of life and birth that a sudden death can be shocking. Unexpected death, particularly of the young, can trigger Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association 1994). Modern death is locked away in funeral parlours where the deceased either slides directly into the cremation chamber, or is hidden behind a curtain, as mourners shuffle out; coffins are closed. At the very least, museum displays of human remains allow people to actually know what a dead body might look like – often the first dead body they will ever see. *Bodyworlds* has been compelling for some people, upsetting for others, and insulting to a few, but whatever the individual reactions, these posed figures mirror what humans look like when they bend, stretch, carry things, sit, read, and play. *Bodyworlds* may seem insensitive to certain people, but it is claimed that the bodies were donated willingly, using explicit forms detailing various potential postures. The show is informative from a biological and anatomical perspective, and clearly illustrates the effects of unhealthy lifestyles and diets.

Consistency is needed in how 'display of the dead' is approached. If display of individuals who have clearly been unable to give permission is to be avoided, with the possible justification that their elaborate tombs, riddled with sealed doors and hidden passageways, were therefore *meant* to remain secret (cf. Hubert 1989), is it then acceptable to display their grave goods at all? Under the NAGPRA legislation in the US, indigenous dead are to be repatriated if requested, but so too are all of the associated the grave goods (Rose *et al.* 1996; United States Department of the Interior National Park Service 2006). One would assume therefore that Egyptian sarcophagi and indeed *any* objects found within a tomb or pyramid would fall into this category. It would surely be illogical and inconsistent to deny students and interested audiences a glimpse of an Egyptian mummy while still parading the spoils of Egyptian 'tomb robbing' in a museum.

Public opinion should be respected, and the basic human curiosity of human life should be honoured. Of 15 handwritten comments left on museum-supplied post cards at the Manchester Museum temporary exhibition on Lindow Man (observed on 13 May 2008), 13 were sensible, serious remarks, and all expressed positive opinions about display of the dead. The question posed by the Museum was: Should the dead be displayed? One answer is from 'Victoria _____, 10 years old, of _____' who wrote: 'I think that it is good for younger people to see what there [sic] bodies will do when they stop working'. Clearly, the assertion that ever more people are against display of the dead is not borne out in this admittedly small sample, nor on the Museum's own website.

The study of organic human remains has been an integral part of art and medical syllabi for centuries. No plastic skeleton or even well-made cast can ever replace a genuine skeleton in this respect. The abnormal lack of weight of an osteoporotic bone can never be learned by handling a plastic one, nor evidence of activity or disease taught using generic models. Lesions and bone defects cannot be examined microscopically for information about the prevalence of ancient diseases (some of which, like tuberculosis, have resurged, and which like Paget's remain a mystery) by studying a cast.

The *Bodyworlds* exhibit emulates the work of early anatomists and their vital wax-infused preparations. It is probable that students become more interested in human biology after visiting, an assumption based on posted comments and personally overheard at the exhibition. Western culture is terminally isolated from death. We do not understand it. We fear it. It often disgusts us. We quarantine the dead and their mourners in funeral homes, we sanitize the experience with greeting cards and inane comments about fate; we wonder when grieving friends will 'get over it'. We do not like to discuss death, and often change the subject. On the other hand, death can be remade for entertainment and shock value, as in horror films. An alternative is to examine death in an adult manner, to appreciate that life is finite, and take the opportunity to study the human body. Then, we may learn to heal the body, repair the body, or simply learn to live with different, imperfect bodies. Exhibits of human remains are still just exhibits of humans, shown to be mortal: it is simply Death.

NO

The argument that we should not display the dead will look at four aspects: that displays inherently treat bodies as things, not persons; whether displays of the dead are necessary; the wishes of the dead themselves; and what looking at displays of the dead says about us, the viewers, and about our culture.

When we display dead bodies, we treat them in the same way as things (Brooks and Rumsey 2006; Brooks and Rumsey 2007; cf. Bienkowski 2006b). We put them into a particular context, with restricted information that is carefully chosen to interpret the dead body for our own contingent purposes. In this way, we turn bodies into objects, 'things' to be used for our needs, for the purposes of the still living. But of course they are, or were, persons. Some religious and spiritual traditions (and those with no religion) believe the dead body is an empty husk, with no soul (or a soul that has departed the body), and therefore it is indeed a 'thing'. For other traditions, there is no such division between body and soul, and the dead, even the long dead, should be treated as if they are still persons, still part of the community (Hubert 1992; Tarlow 2006). But even those who feel that the dead body is an empty husk feel differently when the body is someone they are close to: a relative, a grandmother, a child, a close friend. They do

not want to see them on display – or indeed, often, used in any other way (see wider discussion in Moreland and Rae 2000).

A key principle of the Human Tissue Act 2004 is that human remains 'should be treated with appropriate respect and dignity'. Can we ever achieve that if we are using dead bodies as objects, for our own purposes and needs, irrespective of the wishes of the dead? A mother whose children's organs had been removed without consent at Alder Hey Children's Hospital was quoted as being 'disgusted and appalled' at the staging of the *Bodyworlds 4* exhibition in Manchester, and campaigned to stop it (Innes 2008). Concerns about the way human bodies are treated within *Bodyworlds* are part of a wider ethical argument that modern biotechnology is turning human bodies into a product: the human body is becoming a resource to be mined, harvested, patented and traded commercially for profit as well as for scientific and therapeutic advances (Andrews and Nelkin 1998a, 1998b, 2001).

Dead bodies are clearly necessary for medical research and training (though for a contrary view see Winkelmann 2007) – although there is a question whether there have been any positive developments in social, environmental or medical policy in which knowledge derived from *ancient* human remains was necessary – but what are the reasons for *displaying* the dead (Rees Leahy 2008)? There is an argument that museums are playing an important role in introducing visitors, perhaps especially children, to the reality of the dead human body, in a society where death is hidden, or accessed mostly through television, film and video games (Parker Pearson 1999; Sledzik and Barbian 2001; for the cultural 'denial' of death, see Becker 1973). The problem is that displays do not introduce visitors to the real experience of death, the death of someone close: exhibitions of human remains effectively distance the viewer from any understanding of the nature of human remains and death. Human remains are displayed as clean bones or preserved specimens, frequently obscured by liquid in glass jars. Cases and bottles act as additional barriers and exclude any smells that might have connotations of death and decay (Brooks and Rumsey 2006). There is no relationship between us and these displayed dead, and that lack of relationship makes it futile: in fact it emphasizes the dead as objects, as nothing to do with us. As Hibbs (2007) points out, the problem with death in our culture is not that we have taboos surrounding it, but that we lack a rich language for articulating its meaning, and he cannot see how an exhibition like *Bodyworlds* can help in that regard. What is on display is not the mystery of death, but the reduction of bodies to inert plastinated parts displayed for viewers, which Hibbs calls 'a pornography of the dead human body' (2007: 131).

Is display of the dead necessary for education? The *Bodyworlds* exhibition claims to be educational, in terms of helping visitors understand their own bodies or promoting a healthier lifestyle (Maienschein and Creath 2007), but many of the poses are sensationalist or intended to be humorous – and certainly not dignified or respectful (Rees Leahy 2008). The London exhibition of *Bodyworlds* in 2002-3 exhibited a goalkeeper catching his own intestines, and a witch-like figure flying on her broomstick wearing comic spectacles with her facial skin pulled up to form her hat (Brooks and Rumsey 2006). There is no educational benefit in such displays (Allen 2007; cf. Moore and Brown 2007).

Although *Bodyworlds* is marketed as an exhibition of 'real human bodies', informal feedback suggests that some people think the bodies in *Bodyworlds* are not real (and most museums with Egyptian displays receive similar comments about Egyptian mummies). In a sense, of course, the bodies are *not* real: they are artificially preserved, replacing all water and fats with liquid silicone rubber, turning them into 'inorganic organisms' (Hirschauer 2006: 36). Abrahamsson comments on the paradox of such plastic, inorganic bodies which nevertheless, for him, 'come alive as visitors circle and navigate between them' (2009). There is little evidence of formal evaluation that demonstrates the actual educational benefit of using real dead bodies in displays such as *Bodyworlds*, which attempt, at least partially, to show the effects of disease and unhealthy lifestyles on the human body (as opposed to visitor perceptions of learning opportunities – see Barbian and Berndt 2001; Brooks and Rumsey 2006). The draw of *Bodyworlds* is not that we can see how bodies look and function: Abrahamsson (2009) points out that what visitors experience is not the messy, smelly and fluid working of the human body but its *being*, frozen like a winter landscape, more like a cryogenetical body. The workings of the body could be shown better with sophisticated artificial models or digital techniques, which would be more respectful, sustainable and cheaper options (Csordas 2000). A review of the educational benefit of traditional dissection as a teaching aid found equivocal results, suggesting

that the advantage of viewing real corpses as opposed to models may be minimal (Winkelmann 2007). As Hibbs (2007) points out, such models might in some ways come even closer to mimicking living bodies, with still active respiratory, digestive and cardiac systems.

What is the purpose of displays of ancient human remains, such as Egyptian mummies or Lindow Man? J.D. Hill, the British Museum's research manager, and formerly the curator who looked after Lindow Man, asks an interesting question in The Manchester Museum's exhibition on Lindow Man:

What is it that you can say about the past or another culture which you can only say by having human remains on display?³

The answer is 'nothing', although most visitors to displays of ancient human remains claim they have learned something new (Kilmister 2003; cf. Barbian and Berndt 2001; Brooks and Rumsey 2006). Nevertheless, in many museums, visitors – and warding staff – are increasingly commenting negatively on the nature of displays of human remains, at the very least feeling that they should be in context, respectful and informative (Kilmister 2003; MacDonald 2002).⁴

Sarah Tarlow asks if there are details of past people too intimate to display (Tarlow 2006). A display can show the diseases which affected an individual, what food they ate, that they had lice, worms or syphilis, a third nipple or any other deformity. Does it make a difference whether that individual is anonymous? Do we need to know these things and do we need to display them? Although Tarlow makes the valid point that privacy and dignity are cultural constructs and not universal values, nevertheless is it ever acceptable to make a person's naked body available to public view, unless there is express free and informed consent?

There is an argument that individuals freely donating their dead bodies to be used in *Bodyworlds* displays should be free to do so, and that it is their express and informed wish to be publicly displayed after death. On the face of it, this is a powerful argument, but it is not so simple. First of all, it is interesting to consider the motivations of *Bodyworlds* donors. Are plastination and display of one's dead body a bid for the immortality sought by humans throughout history, albeit a postmodern, deconstructed form of immortality that freezes the body into a moment of mass public spectacle – a Warholian 15 minutes of fame that is, paradoxically, post-mortem (cf. Bauman 1992, 1997)? In a sense this might exorcise the terror of death by ensuring the body survives indefinitely (the plastinated bodies are expected to remain stable for at least 4000 years – Walter 2004a), which is about as close as ordinary people can get to the medical transcendence of death offered by modern cryonics.⁵

More importantly, is what the donors give truly free and informed consent, and are they clear exactly what they are consenting to? There have been concerns expressed about the nature of the consent acquired, and Gunther von Hagens was accused – though later cleared – of illegitimately obtaining bodies sold by psychiatric and general hospitals, a prison and a medical faculty in China, where he was a visiting professor, and Kyrgyzstan (Harris and Connolly 2002). There is also a lingering doubt about the honesty of the information given to potential donors. The *Bodyworlds* donor forms (which are handed out to visitors entering the exhibition at most venues) ask for bodies to be donated for 'research and educational purposes'.⁶ Donors are able to tick boxes agreeing that their bodies 'can be used for the medical enlightenment of laypeople and, to this ends [sic], exhibited in public (e.g. in a museum)', and 'agree that my body can be used for an anatomical work of art', but this seems to be insufficient transparent consent to cover the nature of some of the *Bodyworlds* sensationalist displays (Burns 2007; Tong 2007).

The Human Tissue Authority's guidelines on consent state that consent can only be given by someone who is 'appropriately informed' and has the capacity to agree to the proposed activity. Clearly, not every plastinated 'specimen' in *Bodyworlds* is capable of giving consent – the fetuses, babies and animals did not give their consent to be plastinated and displayed, and they are among the more controversial displays: indeed one fetus was stolen from the *Bodyworlds* exhibition at the California Science Center (Jablon 2005). In this context it should be noted that *Bodyworlds* is run by the Institute of Plastination, which is a business, and does not function as a museum or a charity. As Brooks and Rumsey state, *Bodyworlds* is not a museum display and lies outside the normal parameters of museum ethics, but rather it 'seems to be a cross between a medical, art and freak show, using both educational and gratuitously sensationalist strategies to attract huge numbers of visitors' (2006: 278).

Should we consider the wishes of the ancient dead, from whom it is impossible to obtain consent for excavation and display? Tarlow (2006) points out that it is possible to argue that all our ethical responsibilities relate to the present and future, and that the past is a 'resource' to be used to support the present, but that there is also a contrary argument that we owe a responsibility towards past people, at least in terms of how we represent them. In 1989, the World Archaeological Congress held its Inter-Congress on 'Archaeological Ethics and the Treatment of the Dead' in Vermillion, South Dakota. Although the overwhelming context of that meeting was relationships between archaeologists and indigenous peoples, the resulting Vermillion Accord has wider implications. Notably, the word 'respect' appears in each of its six clauses. Clause 2 is particularly pertinent to the argument about the wishes of the ancient dead:

Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.⁷

Often there are clear archaeological indications that, even though a person did not expressly prohibit archaeological excavation and display, they would not have welcomed any disturbance of their burial: heavy slabs, stones, mounds of earth or pyramids may cover or conceal the entrance to a place of burial. In these cases excavation and display surely constitute 'pretty flagrant disregard for the wishes of the deceased' (Tarlow 2006: 210).

In the Hunterian Museum in London there is a display of 'The Irish Giant' Charles Byrne, known as O'Brien. In the early 1780s he made it clear that he did not wish to be exhibited after his death. He had been involved in freak shows during his life but asked specifically to be buried at sea to avoid being dissected by surgeons (Moore 2005; Richardson 2001). John Hunter managed to acquire his body for his collection, and the museum continues to display his body, in disregard of his express wishes. It is alleged that several requests over the years from individuals in Ireland that the Hunterian Museum repatriate O'Brien's body and bury it at sea as he originally intended have been denied by the museum, apparently on the grounds that O'Brien's wishes cannot be proved in writing.

We know that the ancient Egyptians would have regarded the excavation, investigation, transport overseas and display of mummies as a violation and desecration of their wish for their bodies to remain undisturbed in the land of Egypt. Hubert (1989) cites clear evidence from Egyptian texts that not only did they wish their bodies to remain undisturbed, but also that they should remain buried in their own country, in their own tombs. The physical body was intended never to leave the tomb. It is often argued that the display of Egyptian mummies in museums outside Egypt supports the ancient Egyptians' own desire for immortality. Yet what is ignored or misunderstood in this justification is that they craved an immortality connected to place, linked to Egypt itself, which was the centre of their animistic world. In this sense the ancient Egyptian wish to be buried in the land of Egypt has close similarities to the wishes of indigenous peoples, whose animistic beliefs crave a close connection in death with their ancestral soil (e.g. Webb 1987; Hubert 1989, 1992; Pullar 1994; Sadongei and Cash 2007). Harrison (2003), writing of the importance of place in human experience, suggests that human institutions, as well as individual human lives, are founded on places sacred to the memory of our antecedents, and that the most 'aboriginal' sign of this 'history-making mortality' is the grave-marker. The buried dead form an essential foundation where future generations can retrieve their past, while burial grounds provide an important bedrock where past generations can preserve their legacy for the unborn. Hubert (1989) cites the well known ancient Egyptian story of Sinuhe, who describes his overwhelming desire to return from Asia to his own country, Egypt, to die and to be buried in his tomb on the banks of the Nile. Even the pharaoh exhorts Sinuhe to return – 'You shall not die abroad! Nor shall the Asiatics inter you. Think of your corpse – come back!' (Hubert 1989: 162-3).

The philosopher Geoffrey Scarre points out that we do not have to share, for example, Tutankhamun's own religious beliefs about the consequences of harm to his eternal spirit and to his body after death to recognize that we have a duty to his remains and how we deal with them (Scarre 2003). Maltreatment of his body, removal from his tomb, and use for undignified purposes are very obviously 'deeply inimical' to a project that was of great importance to him during life (Scarre 2003). Yet mummies have been dug up and exported from Egypt, and museums around the world display Egyptian mummies, openly denying - or ignoring - the clear

wishes of the ancient Egyptians themselves. In what way does that show 'respect' to the dead? What does that say about our modern cultural 'fascination' for ancient Egypt? – that we are interested as long as the wishes of the ancient Egyptians themselves do not get in the way of our entertainment? If that is true, then the ancient Egyptians are only a resource for the present: they are a means to our ends. Scarre (2006) argues that we should honour the wishes of the Egyptians because they are ends in themselves, and that morally we should accord them the right to a say in what happens to them after their death.

What does displaying and viewing the dead say about us, as the viewers, or about our culture? The question is not rhetorical, but is concerned with how we value different people. In our twenty-first-century culture, some people are accorded dignity and buried, while some are not and are displayed. How do we choose what happens to whom? Those who are distant from us - in time, race or place - do not get the same respect, or are less valued, and are effectively treated as objects. If the 2008 *Bodyworlds 4* exhibition displayed recent residents from Manchester, or from a small village in Cheshire, or if we exhumed the body of Princess Diana and put her on display as an example of late twentieth-century royalty, would it be acceptable? At the very least there would almost certainly be huge uproar, accusations of disrespect and indecency, and pressure on the Human Tissue Authority not to grant a public display licence for the exhibition. But it remains acceptable (and legal), because the bodies come from China, or Germany, or places we do not know about.

In his 1867 book *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) Emile Zola gave a horrific description of the Paris morgue in the nineteenth century, a place people visited for free amusement:

The Morgue is within the reach of every purse; passers-by, rich and poor alike, treat themselves to this free show. The door is open, anyone can enter. Some connoisseurs make a special detour so as not to miss one of these displays of death, and when the slabs are bare people go out muttering, feeling let down and swindled. When the slabs are occupied and there is a nice show of human flesh, the visitors jostle each other and indulge in cheap thrills, shudder with horror, crack jokes, applaud or whistle just as they would at the theatre, and finally go away satisfied, declaring that the Morgue has been a good show today (Zola 1962: 109-10).

To many visitors and commentators, the *Bodyworlds* displays feel like Zola's description of looking at the dead for entertainment, with no dignity in either the bodies or in the viewer (cf. Moore and Brown 2007). Hibbs similarly compares *Bodyworlds* to Dante's imaginative journey among the dead:

Clearly I saw, and the sight still comes back,
a trunk without a head come walking on
just like the others of that sullen pack,
that held the chopped-off head by the leg hanks,
hanging like a lantern from his hand. (Dante, *Inferno*, in Hibbs 2007: 128.)

Hibbs (2007: 128) questions if *Bodyworlds* has substantive educational value, or is

merely feeding our inordinate taste for the macabre while masquerading as science education... The impulse of some scientists to praise the Body Worlds exhibit for its pedagogical value indicates how desperate scientists are to interest an ignorant and indifferent citizenry in the necessity and significance of scientific knowledge.

He accuses *Bodyworlds* – and our society – of desensitization to violence in general and to violation of the human body in particular.

In 1998-9 the Museum of London held an exhibition called *London Bodies: The Changing Shape of Londoners from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, with a commitment to show appropriate respect in displays of human remains (even developing two ethics papers, for internal and external use) (Brooks and Rumsey 2006; Ganiaris 2001). Nevertheless, the press launch stressed the sensational aspects: journalists were invited to a themed breakfast of 'long bone toast', and 'bloody fruit juice' before being given torches and being briefed by white-

coated specialists in a darkened basement illuminated by a single light. The implication is that, even if we think we are treating the ancient dead with respect, our culture cannot display them without making them into a freak show, as in the Zola quote above, Walter's description of *Bodyworlds* as part carnival (2004b), or Solomon's description of the phenomenon of the glorification of the death experience, which he calls 'death fetishism' (1998: 162).

In sum, the question is often asked: should the needs of the living outweigh those of the dead? If it were an issue of real necessity, then this question might be applicable to this debate about displaying the dead. But it is the wrong question. These are not needs, because as argued above those needs can be satisfied by other methods than displaying the dead. We do not learn anything new or useful by looking at displays of human remains. We do not *need* to do it. Displaying the dead is simply a desire, a wish for entertainment, sensationalism, curiosity: it is akin to looking at the contents of someone's wallet or having a peep to see what they look like naked. It may be interesting, to some, but it is not necessary. If we are serious about showing dignity and respect to the dead, especially the ancient dead, to respect their own wishes, to treat them as persons with a say in what happens to them after their death, there is no reason at all to display the dead.

SOMETIMES

There is a near universal human instinct to treat the dead with respect; human societies have developed ceremonies and rituals to both mark the passing of an individual and to memorialize them (Simpson 2001; Brooks and Rumsey 2006). Bodies are buried or cremated, with possessions and without, 'burial grounds become potent memorials and sanctified spaces The continued well-being and approval of the deceased is sometimes believed to be essential for the well-being of the living' (Simpson 2001: 173). For archaeologists and anthropologists, this becomes evidence to explain the complexities of these societies themselves; the treatment of death and the dead by past societies is an important way of understanding how they perceived life. Within contemporary societies, displaying the dead is normal accepted practice, often as part of a religious belief. It is possible to travel the world and see dead human bodies on display including the bones or corpses of Christian saints or Buddhist lamas, in places such as the well renowned bone church of Sedlec near Prague or the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo.⁸

Museum visitors are fascinated by displays of the dead; in the case of ancient Egypt it is not just the mummified remains but the whole range of associated artefacts which create a glimpse into life over 2000 years ago. Hence the daily crush of visitors at the British Museum around a Pre-Dynastic body commonly referred to as Ginger, the record visitor numbers at the Manchester Museum when Lindow Man returned in 1991, or the millions of visitors worldwide to the various versions of von Hagens' *Bodyworlds* shows.

This fascination and curiosity goes back to the earliest days of public museums where the remains were there to 'create surprise rather than ...instruction' – for example, the anatomical collection in Dresden was arranged like a pleasure garden where 'skeletons were interwoven with branches of trees to form vistas' (Murray 1904: 208), while in Leiden the skeleton of a woman who killed her own daughter was displayed sitting on the skeleton of an ass. This style of display has clear echoes today in the *Bodyworlds* exhibition. By the eighteenth century, museum displays of the dead had 'placed the accent on anatomical peculiarities, and were viewed primarily as a testimony to the rich diversity of the chain of universal being' (Bennett 1995: 79). By the late nineteenth century, however, human remains were 'typically displayed as parts of evolutionary series with the remains of still extant peoples being allocated the earliest position within them' (Bennett 1995: 79). At the Manchester Museum in 1892 human remains were displayed within a zoological context alongside other primates; the 'Human Race is represented by a series of skulls of various nationality types' (Hoyle 1892: 24). David Murray, writing in 1904, confirmed the prevalence of this when he stated that 'a collection of human skulls is one of the features of a modern anthropological museum' (Murray 1904: 208). This was particularly true for the remains of Australian Aborigines whose sacred sites were the subject of a 'systematic rape' for specimens to 'provide a representational foundation for the story of evolution within...natural history displays' (Bennett 1995: 79).

So why do the dead still hold a fascination for museum and exhibition visitors? To many it is a claimed 'connection of the past with the present, and the dead with the living' (Brooks and

Rumsey 2006: 261), a connection which can elicit an emotional or religious response and even offer solace. To others, human remains offer an insight into the scientific and forensic; they can be used to explain growth, from foetus to adult, variation, pathology, the impact of disease, the health of a past population. It has even been argued that museums play an important role in introducing visitors to the reality of a dead human body (Brooks and Rumsey 2006; Day 2006).

However, some visitors are unaware that bodies on display are real, and were once living people. Bodies in museums are 'recontextualized human remains' – they have been removed from their place of burial into what is seen as 'another sacred context where they are preserved for a different function' (Brooks and Rumsey 2006: 261). They have become both 'persons and things' (Geary 1986: 169). When we look upon a human body on display, are we looking at the remains of a person, or an object?

Most museums, and museum professionals, recognize the value of human remains for learning about past peoples and, where treated appropriately and respectfully, the inclusion of human remains in research, educational and display programmes can be a positive benefit to a wide range of audiences. Museums have a responsibility to display human remains, including mummies, in ways which are designed to inform, involve and interest visitors rather than to sensationalize. Whenever museum professionals put human remains on display, they are faced with the question: how can we do this in a manner which both respects and reflects their humanity? They are confronted with a range of overlapping and often conflicting concerns. A primary reason for displaying human remains is to educate and inform, either about past cultures or the human species. Curators acknowledge the natural curiosity of the visiting public, and know that this takes many forms, ranging from the coolly scientific to the frankly morbid. They are aware that different cultures, and different religious groups within a culture, hold varying belief systems related to the human body, both in life and death. What is meant by respectful treatment is a relative concept; the difficulty for museums is in negotiating a passage through this which is in keeping with the museum's own mission and aims.

Returning to the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, here there are displays of over 3,000 items of human remains, including John Evelyn's anatomical tables dating from the 1640s which are believed to be the oldest such preparations in Europe. Each of these tables shows a different part of the body (nervous system, arteries, lungs and liver, and veins), each dissected out and glued to a wooden board. They are historical artefacts, dating to a critical period in the understanding and exploration of the human body and the advancement of medical science; they were made with the express purpose of teaching medicine and anatomy. However, like the *Bodyworlds* preparations, they also demonstrate the skill of the anatomical preparator.

The Hunterian Museum and *Bodyworlds* can also be compared in their presentation of human fetuses. In *Bodyworlds* these are accorded a different treatment to the rest of the human remains. Lying on pillows of black velvet may be an attempt to acknowledge their humanity or some respect to the unborn child, but what it does is to turn them into art objects, each with their own spotlight much as jewellery is on show in art museums, or even high-class jewellers. Compare this to the outright medical display of the Hunterian, where the body as medical specimen elucidates a far greater understanding of development within the womb. Which is not to say that plastinated human remains do not have a place in any display; there is a thinly-sliced female body at the entrance to the new Wellcome Galleries in London. Here the display is within the context of artistic responses to the human body and disease. It does not create the same emotions as the posed bodies in *Bodyworlds*, nor is it intended to.

Tim Cole argues that institutions such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum are more than simply museums, they have 'in some way become mass graves' (Cole 2000: 167). He recounts discussions in the museum over whether it was appropriate or not to display nine kilograms of human hair from Auschwitz, with some seeing it as 'testimony to the "ultimate rationality of the destruction process"' (Cole 2000: 169 quoting Raul Hilberg) and important evidence that the Holocaust had taken place. Some museum professionals Cole spoke to took the view that these were 'relics of once vital individuals, which do not belong in a museum setting but rather in a memorial setting' and that to display them would 'run the very real risk of creating a cabinet of horrible curiosities' (Cole 2000: 169). The remains are not on display. At the Holocaust Museum in Houston, however, similar remains are on display as senior staff there

feel they form an essential element in telling the whole truth about the Holocaust, and that 'what the hair does is to actually bring you to a different layer of truth'; it forces the visitor to reflect on the humanity behind the sheer number of dead, a figure it is impossible to imagine or conceptualize (Cole 2000: 169).

It is the intellectual framework behind museum exhibitions which is crucial in deciding when, where, if and how the dead should be displayed. Perhaps the question ought to be 'how should we display the dead?' After all, 'when we look at a dead body from whatever period or culture, we are all looking, in some sense, at ourselves and our own end' (Brooks and Rumsey 2006: 261). As the DCMS Guidelines state, it is the relevance of the display to the purpose of the individual museum that is the issue: human remains should only be displayed if they 'make a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made equally effectively in another way' (DCMS 2005: 20). We have presented here a dissensus on that material contribution, which we hope will provoke further informed, respectful debate on this important issue in principle and in practice.

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Notes

- ¹ <<http://egyptmanchester.wordpress.com/category/egyptian-mummies/>>, accessed 20 December 2008.
- ² <<http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/>>, accessed 20 December 2008.
- ³ Quoted in panel text in the exhibition *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery*, The Manchester Museum, 19th April 2008-19th April 2009.
- ⁴ Here are two typical responses, written by visitors on comment cards in 2007, about Manchester Museum's display of Egyptian mummies: 'I think it is horrible to show the bodies to the public. You should return the bodies where you found them in the first place.' 'I think the robbing and desecration of Egyptian graves is an obscenity and these displays are something the institution should be thoroughly ashamed of.'
- ⁵ The Institute of Plastination, in its donor forms, asks donors for their motivation in donating their bodies for plastination, in a series of nine boxes to be checked. One of the answers prompted is 'I am fascinated by the thought of being preserved forever for posterity'. Another, more prosaically, is 'I wish to save on the costs of a funeral'. See <<http://www.koerperspende.de/en/downloads.html>>, accessed 20 December 2008.
- ⁶ <<http://www.koerperspende.de/en/downloads.html>>, accessed 20 December 2008.
- ⁷ <http://www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org/site/about_ethi.php#code2>, accessed 6 November 2009.
- ⁸ <<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/sacred-sites/dead-on-display.htm>>, accessed 20 December 2008.

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